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KARL WIRSUM

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The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art
750 Marguerite Drive
Winston-Salem, North Carolina 27106

KARL WIRSUM

Wake Forest University • Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art
North Carolina School of the Arts

Artist-In-Residence Program

14 January—28 February 1982

Sponsored by The Rockefeller Foundation

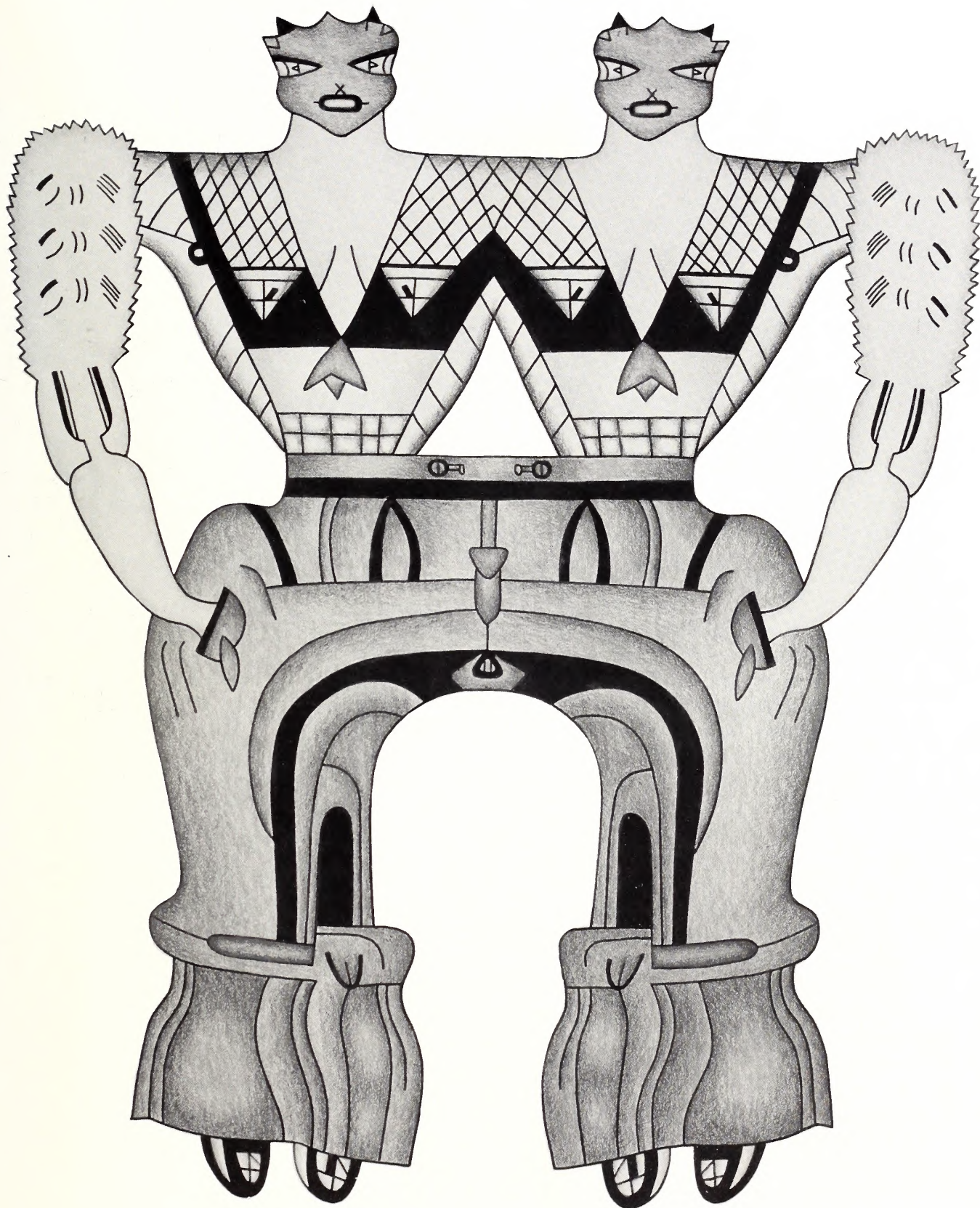
Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

foreword

Karl Wirsum brings to a close the fourth year of a major artist-in-residence program co-sponsored by Wake Forest University, the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art and the North Carolina School of the Arts. In this residency, as in each of the others, the energy of the artist and the design of the program have combined to foster a dynamic exchange with both the artist and the community benefiting in ways that are uniquely important to them. Over the past four years, this program has played a tremendous role in the cultural vitality of the Winston-Salem community.

On behalf of the steering committee and program coordinators at each of the three sponsoring institutions, I wish to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for making this program possible. However, at the same time, it must be said that the spirit and energy that this program has generated combine to express our most genuine thanks.

Laura Carpenter
Program Coordinator



FITS TUTU TO A TEA OR STRETCH YOUR COFFEE BREAK (#2), 1979

Wirsum dazzles, Wirsum overwhelms. . . between the absurd, horrific

By Dennis Adrian

Karl Wirsum's recent work continues his multifaceted line of eye-dazzling imaginative inventions which have established him as one of the central figures among the group of innovative artists emerging in Chicago during the 1960s. Wirsum's art has always manifested, and in fact helped define, some of the principal shared concerns of the various painter/sculptors who, for better or for worse, seem stuck with the label "imagist." These concerns are an almost obsessive interest with craft and brilliant technical finish; a relentless exploitation of the possibilities of formal manipulation within figure-ground relationships; a very high ratio of formal incident to the pictorial (or other) field; strong, often unmodulated color; relationships of the imagery to analogous form and content in the vernacular environment; and an emphasis on the physical nature of the work, especially painting, as an object.

A special contribution of Wirsum's art is the wide range of techniques and materials, many of which are related to different kinds of anonymously produced objects in the popular environment. It should be said right away that this tendency has nothing to do with Pop Art of the 1960s, which, in its classic phases, "arted up" popular subject matter in terms of the most sophisticated post-Cubist Modernism: Lichtenstein-as-Leger-Matisse-et al is the obvious exemplar of this. Wirsum, along with other

artists in Chicago, was and is interested in emulating many of the principles of popular and anonymous design and also in discovering and creating principles of composition, form, color, and what have you analogous to those found in various aspects of art outside the Western tradition from the Renaissance on. Wirsum's jagged forms, eye-popping colors and skillful parodies of chic, sleek, suave Neo-Deco Moderne really go nearer the Lindisfarne Gospels, Celtic Metalwork, or different moments in Islamic illumination or Far Eastern ceramics than to much in the official strains of 20th century art.

But part of Wirsum's point is to get us to observe the fortuitous relationships between the fantasies of a Japanese monster-toy designer and those of an Ottonian illuminator. While his painted wooden set-up or pull-toy cut-outs seem fully within the realm of Mondo-trasho kid culture, the formal aspects of these objects and his masks, paper cut-outs, cheap prints and colored pencil drawings are actually formed with a richness of design and compositional ability drawn from non-Western or "unofficial" artistic traditions. Nor is Wirsum a faux-naif [childlike] or nostalgic folklorist. Charm and innocence as well as quaint simplicity are utterly alien to his work. The world of popular images—baseball cards, carny dolls, cardboard box games and puzzles, and Halloween drag—is for Wirsum a repertoire of imagistic possibilities which it is his concern to emulate, rival, intensify and surpass not only on their own terms but with the additional sophistication and complexity of the varied "sources" (and others) that have been mentioned.

In order to do this, Wirsum boldly grasps the connection between visual ambivalences (not ambiguities) and the verbal pun. A number of his works flaunt this visual/verbal play in their titles. In addition to the hokey affability of these titles, the interplay of form, meaning, title and object-character is the mechanism which Wirsum supremely manipulates to amplify and enhance all possible meanings and interpretation, and is the armature upon which his formal intricacies are articulated. His intention is to dazzle and overwhelm, and to do this in such a way that the viewer is not just given the carefully engineered effect of a moment of startling surprise which installations of his own work invariably provide, but also to ensure that this level of excitement enduringly pervades all parts of each component work.



THE "DON'T TELL FERNANDEL WHILE HE LOOKED LIKE DON HAYMES" TROPHY, 1981



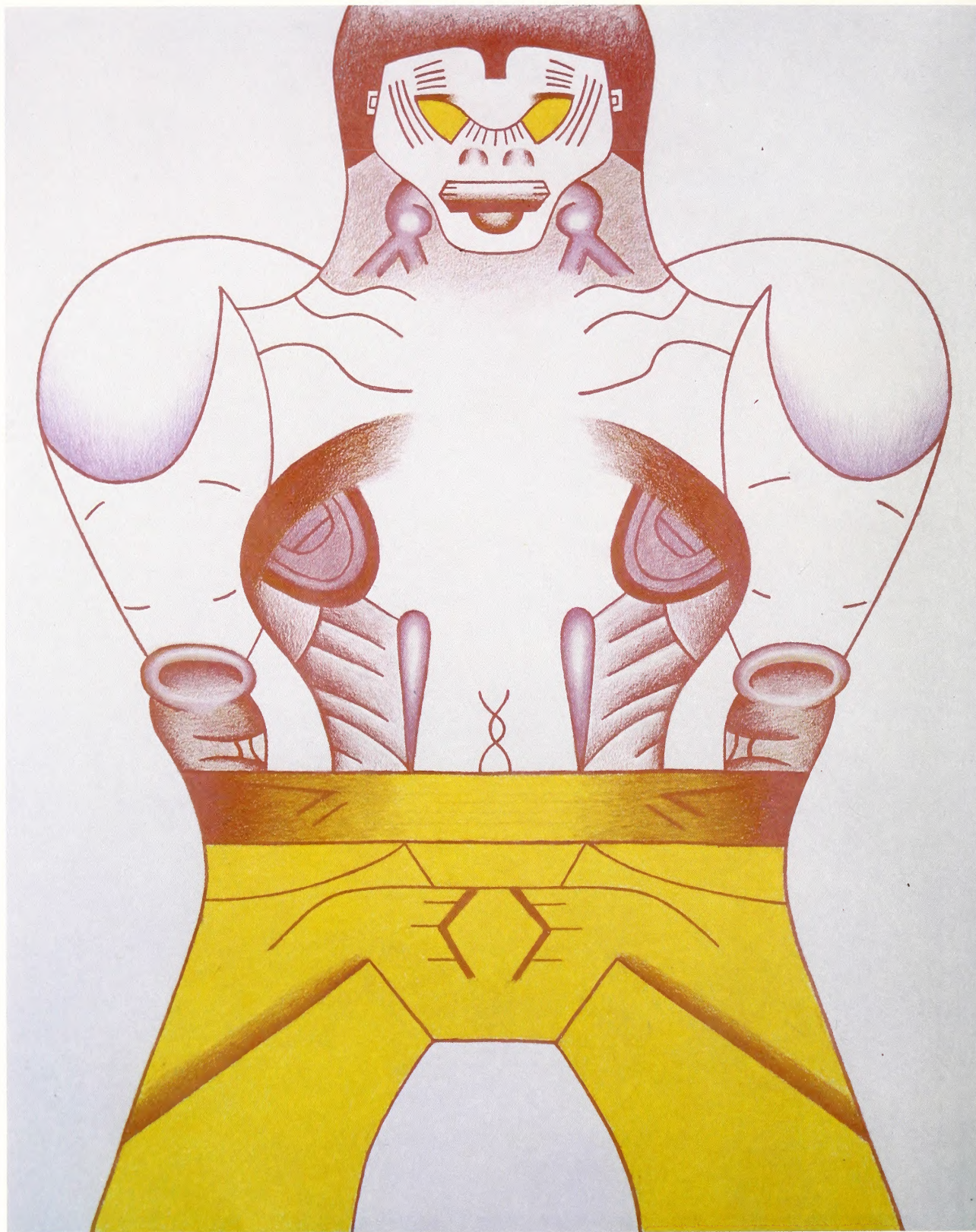
LET YOUR YELLOWED FINGERS DO THE WALKING (BILEGRAPHIC BIOGRAPHY), 1981



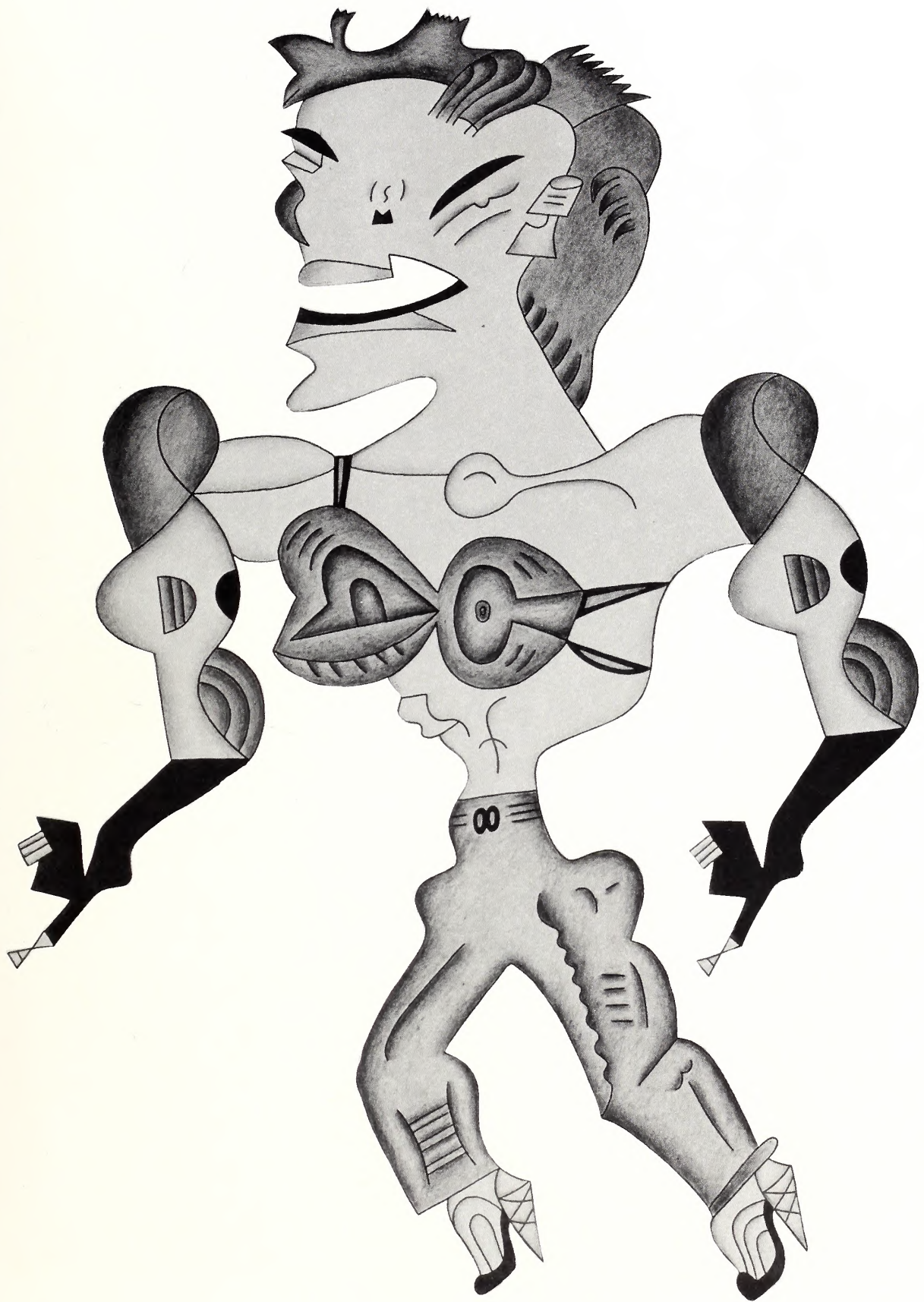
AMERICAN METALIC MANIAC, 1980



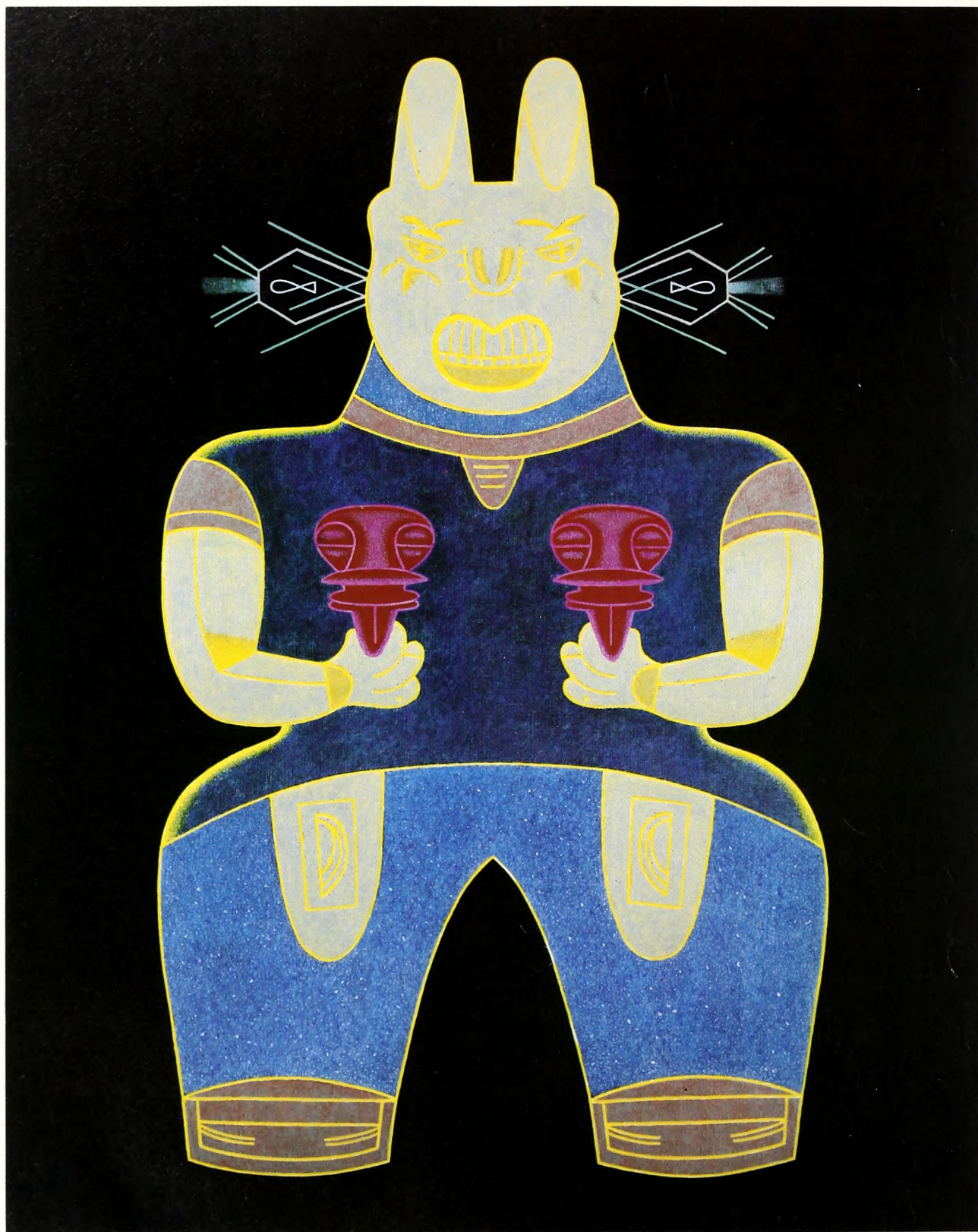
HELIUM HARE SERIES (SLICED SALAMI NECKTIE), 1981



EXPANSION BREACHES, 1979



CHILI HEELS, 1981



BRONZE BUNNY WITH SHOETREE POCKETS, 1981

What exactly is the realm of Wirsum's expression? It seems to exist in a strange area between the absurd and the horrific, but rather than being like the amiable spookiness of Dubuffet's patterned personages, it is closer in feeling and formal vocabulary to wittily animated demons and beings in the Oceanic art of New Ireland and New Guinea. Wirsum's compositions tend to hover around the bilaterally symmetrical and he loves the doubled, not quite exactly repeated image. Perhaps these organizational approaches provide the surface kinship with different sorts of tribal art. But, further, it is the quality of sensate awareness, of animistic life, in his work that remains so remarkable. This seems to be a genuine intuitive ability of Wirsum's, although he is very conscious of the necessity of bringing it up to full force through laborious refinement and the development of each image and form.

This same quality appears gratuitously in the painted metal toys, Mozarabic ornaments, and early Chinese bronze motifs which Wirsum loves and wishes to rival but not copy. In his relationship of these sorts of sources and precedents, Wirsum does perhaps have a classic attitude not so different from the Renaissance artist who wished to subsume, emulate and rival the accomplishments of Antique art instead of only deriving from it without the processes of his own invention, imagination, or inner conception. Just as one would (or should) not confuse a Sansovino bronze with an ancient work, Wirsum does not wish us to see his work as growing directly out of popular art or other sources, but as an aesthetically deliberate new presentation of some of its structural systems, unconscious feeling and expressive quality.

Wirsum's art has presented difficulties to the responses of some viewers simply because there is such a bewildering variety in its media, content and form. The objects occasionally baffle those who see the paintings: the special environments installed make his single pieces anomalous for some, and the connections with popular objects have prevented others from seeing into their compositional sophistications. It is, however, just this richness and complexity which set Wirsum apart as remarkable and unique among the artists of his generation and establish him at the center of one of the most interesting and significant developments in American art.

KARL WIRSUM

born: 1939, Chicago, Illinois

education: Graduated from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago,
1966

collections: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Art Institute of Chicago
Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna
Kalamazoo Institute of Art
American Telephone & Telegraph
Jean Dubuffet, Paris
Thomas Armstrong, New York
Anne D'Harnoncourt Rishel, Philadelphia
Edwin A. Bergman, Chicago
John Bower, New York
A. James Speyer, Chicago
Joseph Randall Shapiro, Chicago

one-man exhibitions: Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York, 1977
Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, 1974, 1976
Wabash Transit Gallery, Chicago, 1971
St. Xavier College, 1970
Dell Gallery, Chicago, 1967

selected group exhibitions:

Masterpieces of Chicago Art, The Chicago Public Library Cultural Center, 1977

The Chicago Connection, E.B. Crocker Art Gallery, Sacramento and Traveling Show, 1976—77

Former Famous Alumni, The School of The Art Institute of Chicago, 1976

Art Now, Artrend Foundation, John F. Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C., 1975

"Made in Chicago," XII Biennial de Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo Brazil & Traveling Show (South America, The National Collection, Washington, D.C. & The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago), 1973—74

The Chicago and Vicinity Show, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1974

What They're Up To In Chicago, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario and Traveling Show, 1972

Chicago Imagist Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1972

Chicago Antigua, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, 1971

Marriage Chicago Style, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, 1970

Thirteen Artists from Chicago, Richard Feigen Gallery, New York, 1970

Surplus Slop from the Windy City, San Francisco Art Institute/Sacramento State College Art Gallery, 1970

Human Concern/Personal Torment, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York/University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, 1969—70

Spirit of the Comics, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1969

"Don Baum Sez 'Chicago Needs Famous Artists,'" Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1969

The Hairy Who, Drawings at School of Visual Arts Gallery, New York, 1969

Paintings to Be Read, Poetry to Be Seen, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1968

1968 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1968

The Hairy Who, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, 1966, 1967, 1968

Karl Wirsum is represented by The Phyllis Kind Gallery in Chicago and New York.

catalog of the exhibition

- * 1. EXPANSION BREACHES, 1979
Color Pencil on Paper
72 x 56.5 centimeters
2. TIN MAN, 1979
Cardboard and Paper
70 x 17.5 x 12.5 centimeters
3. EAST EAR HEAD, 1979
Acrylic on Wood
45.8 x 32 x 2.2 centimeters
4. 3 HULK CLONE SECONDS, 1979
Ink on Tissue Paper
53 x 42 centimeters each
- * 5. FITS TUTU TO A TEA OR STRETCH
YOUR COFFEE BREAK (#2), 1979
Color Pencil on Paper
Collection of Ms. Carol Celentano,
New York, New York
73 x 58.2 centimeters
6. UNTITLED #23 (BROWN LADY), 1979
Color Pencil on Black Paper
89 x 58.3 centimeters
7. UPPER MOBILITY, 1979—80
Ink, Pencil and Cloth on Cardboard
32.5 x 28 x 1.8 centimeters
8. UPPER MOBILITY, 1979—80
Ink, Pencil and Cloth on Cardboard
33.7 x 30.6 x 3.3 centimeters
- * 9. AMERICAN METALIC MANIAC, 1980
Acrylic, Foil and Paper
48.6 x 47 centimeters each
10. ZOMBUNNY, 1980
Color Pencil on Black Paper
87 x 57 centimeters
11. UNTITLED BUNNY TRIPTYCH, 1980
Color Pencil on Black Paper
88.5 x 58.3 centimeters each
12. "LOTHAR'S" LUMPS, 1980
Color Pencil on Black Paper
58.2 x 43 centimeters
13. DADDY WAR BUMPS, 1980
Color Pencil on Black Paper
58.2 x 43 centimeters
14. HENRY'S OVER THE HUMP, 1980
Color Pencil on Black Paper
87.5 x 57 centimeters
- * 15. BRONZE BUNNY WITH SHOETREE
POCKETS, 1981
Acrylic on Canvas
99 x 79 centimeters
- * 16. THE "DON'T TELL FERNANDEL WHILE
HE LOOKED LIKE DON HAYMES"
TROPHY, 1981
Acrylic on Canvas
89 x 68 centimeters

17. BACK TO BAY SIX, 1981
Acrylic on Canvas
86 x 58 centimeters
18. THIS IS ONLY A SLUGGED QUESTION,
1981
Acrylic on Paper
86 x 73 centimeters
19. NAN CITY DAILY, 1981
Acrylic on Paper
76 x 84.2 centimeters
20. POWDER POOF (#1), 1981
Color Pencil on Paper
76 x 57 centimeters
21. POWDER POOF (#2), 1981
Color Pencil on Paper
76 x 57 centimeters
22. POWDER POOF (#3), 1981
Color Pencil on Paper
76 x 57 centimeters
23. TWO VIEWS AFTER A GENT NAMED
"ORANGE", 1981
Pencil, Cellophane and Acetate
19.5 x 19.4 centimeters
24. TWO VIEWS AFTER A GENT NAMED
"ORANGE", 1981
Pencil, Cellophane and Acetate
32.2 x 31.5 centimeters
25. LICORICE MENDED MARTIAN WITH
SCARCELY A TRACE OF ACNE
CASE NO. 1, 1981
Acrylic on Canvas
48 x 40.5 centimeters
- * 26. CHILI HEELS, 1981
Ink and Color Pencil on Paper
Collection of Ms. Margaret Wharton,
Glenview, Illinois
75 x 57 centimeters
- * 27. LET YOUR YELLOWED FINGERS DO THE
WALKING (BILEGRAPHIC BIOGRAPHY),
1981
Color Pencil on Paper
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin
Bergman, Chicago, Illinois
87 x 59.5 centimeters
- * 28. HELIUM HARE SERIES (SLICED SALAMI
NECKTIE), 1981
Acrylic on Canvas
91 x 66 centimeters
29. VENETIAN ROBOT, 1981
Acrylic, Cellophane and Acetate
43 x 35.5 centimeters

* Works reproduced in catalog

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